

Hardtack: Tough Through the Ages

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"I tried to throw my hardtack away three times, but each time it walked back to me."

One of the essential foods Cabrillo brought along for the voyage was the notorious biscuit called hardtack. Because it was dried thoroughly it could be stored for many months, making it a reliable food for long voyages. Hardtack did not change from before Cabrillo's time through the Napoleonic Wars. In fact, Cabrillo's sailors would not have noted anything different or unusual about the hardtack issued to our soldiers in the Civil War. By the way, hardtack made in 1865 too late to be issued to the Union Army was properly stored and issued in 1898 during the Spanish American War. Talk about tough!

A Recipe for Hard Tack

3 cups flour (white or whole wheat)
3 Tablespoons salt
Enough water to bind this into a thick, hard dough

Roll the dough out to 1/4 inch thick.
Cut into 2" or 3" squares or rounds.
Poke 9 holes in each piece.

Bake on an ungreased cookie sheet at 200 degrees for one hour. Flip pieces over and bake for one additional hour.

Hard tack was stored in boxes and barrels; the most important thing was to keep it dry so it would not rot or get moldy. It was also very popular with rats, so crewmembers did their best to keep rats away. Killing rats provided a good source of fresh meat for the next meal, as well!

After picking out any weevils with a knife, a sailor might soak the hard tack in water or stew to soften it before eating it. Tougher crewmembers would eat the weevils as a source of protein. Delicious!